



You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your own city—your own, because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the 'others'; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen; your own because it is a circumscribed space in which historical time is suspended and in which every act is valuable in and of itself, in its absolutely immediate consequences. One appropriates a city by fleeing or advancing, charging and being charged, much more than by playing as a child in its streets or strolling through it with a girl. In the hour of revolt, one is no longer alone in the city.



THE SUSPENSION OF HISTORICAL TIME



Furio Jesi



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Chapter two of *Spartakus: The Symbolology of Revolt*. Written in the immediate aftermath of May '68 (in which the Jesi participated), the manuscript was only discovered and published by Andrea Cavalletti in 2000, twenty years after Jesi's premature death. English translation by Alberto Toscano. Text layout is ripped from the Seagull Books edition (it's a lovely book, you should pick it up). Zine layout by Ill Will Editions, July 2017.

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(bar one) seized before the surrender of the workers occupying the *Vorwärts* had been killed. On 13 January, a report—most probably false—led Liebknecht and Luxemburg to leave their relatively safe dwelling in Neukölln to stay with friends in Wilmersdorf. They had vehemently refused to seek shelter in Frankfurt—an entreaty they received from all quarters. In Wilmersdorf, Liebknecht and Luxemburg drafted some articles with the aim of ‘drawing the balance sheet of what happened, to evaluate the events and their results in light of the great standard of history’. At nine in the evening on 15 January, Liebknecht, Luxemburg and Pieck were arrested in their hiding place and led to the Hotel Eden. A few hours later, the corpse of Liebknecht was taken—as the body of an unknown person—to an emergency ward; Luxemburg’s body was thrown from the Liechtenstein bridge into the Landwehr canal from which it resurfaced five months later. The revolt continued to suspend historical time—during the spring of 1919 the legend made the rounds in the working-class neighbourhoods of Berlin that Luxemburg had not been killed, that she had escaped the troops and, when the hour sounded, would once again return at the head of the fighters, leading them to victory.

Berlin represented, from every point of view, the hard core of the class struggle). On the night between 8 and 9 January, the counter-revolutionary troops set their machine-gun fire on the editorial offices of *Rote Fahne* on Wilhelmstrasse and attempted an assault, which was then postponed for (unwarranted) fear of a trap. On the 9th, the offices were abandoned. The evening of 10 January, while negotiations were continuing between the Social Democratic government and that part of the Independent Social Democratic Party which had opted for revolt, the Berlin Kommandatur, with a swift strike, managed to arrest a number of Independent socialist and communist leaders, among them Georg Ledebour and Ernst Meyer. Ledebour was, in fact, one of the delegates at the negotiations. At dawn on 11 January those negotiations ended, as vainly as they began. During the same hours there began the heavy shelling of the offices of *Vorwärts* occupied by the workers. They repelled an initial attack by the troops; but after two more hours of gunfire, the 300 survivors were forced to accept an unconditional surrender. The troops demolished the headquarters of the Communist Party on Friedrichstrasse and arrested Leo Jogiches and Hugo Eberlein. That evening a meeting took place, in the presence of Liebknecht, in the apartment close to Halle Gate where Luxemburg had taken refuge after leaving the editorial offices of *Rote Fahne*. Because this area was now at the centre of the clashes, Liebknecht and Luxemburg left right away to stay with a family in the working-class neighbourhood of Neukölln, where counter-revolutionary troops did not yet dare enter in force. Meanwhile, all the parliamentarians

[A]nd suddenly there is a moment of inexplicable hesitation,
like a gap that opens between cause and effect, an oppression
that makes us dream, almost a nightmare.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter 8, §240



fateful executioner—the massacre of the innocents. But here we are no longer simply dealing with a cruel sacrifice—here, at the end of the First World War, the experience of time can only change through a *determinate* cruel sacrifice. Every choice, every action, meant being in agreement with time. When it all ended, some of the real protagonists had left the stage for ever.

At the end of the demonstration in support of Eichhorn, groups of workers had occupied the headquarters and printworks of the Social Democratic paper *Vorwärts* and of all the important newspapers of the capital. The following morning, 6 January, the workers also occupied the state printworks which printed banknotes. Reliable witness reports prove that the decision to occupy papers and printworks was facilitated by agents provocateurs from the Berlin Kommandatur.

That same day, the revolutionary committee distributed some weapons to the rebels and tried to occupy the War Ministry. Strictly of their own accord, groups of workers occupied the railway stations. While the battle waged almost incessantly in the streets, the revolutionary committee spent long hours in meetings—after exhausting debates, the members of the committee reached the conclusion that it was necessary to negotiate with their adversary. Contemporaneously, in Düsseldorf and Bremen, the workers' and soldiers' councils seized power while in the Rhineland counter-revolutionary troops were defeated in open battle. In Berlin, however, thousands of working-class fighters sacrificed themselves in the defence of strategic positions which—given how the fight had been led—could not be held for long (and

civilians who've stayed home do not suffer these constrictions as much as city dwellers will in the Second—the aerial offensive is in its infancy. But, during the first war, even the inhabitants of the cities and the countryside, the civilians, experience a different time. In the homes of many bourgeois there is a map on which they mark troop movements with coloured flags or pins. They all know that whatever you do during the war counts only in function of the war. In the factories one works for war, at home one lives in accordance with the rhythm of war. Most husbands, fathers or brothers are at the front. Every real decision that matters for the future is postponed until after the war. In domestic hearths, time is measured as it is by the General Staff. And one of the most important modalities of the perception of time, *waiting*, is profoundly altered by the forced construction of things to be awaited and to which the General Staffs devote all their attention.

But when the war ends, this quadrennial wait must find an outlet. For four years one has waited for something. This 'something' turned out not to be victory. It is necessary now to give vent to the wait and to change the experience of time. 'Time of peace, holy night.' Alas, the indispensable holy night is not sufficiently fulfilled by the revolution of November 1919. Scheidemann, proclaiming the Republic from the Berlin Reichstag, was the all-too modest herald of an all-too modest gospel. Neither the announcer nor the announcement suffice truly to change the experience of time. Something more is necessary—every true change in the experience of time is a ritual that demands human victims. Herod entered posterity as a

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Marxist doctrine has added, to the moral condemnation of capitalism, the certainty that iron economic laws are fated to determine, within a certain time limit, the decay and collapse of capitalism itself. Unsurprisingly, some have observed that Marx remained faithful to his Jewish origins by transferring the image of the chosen people onto the world proletariat and Abraham's pact with God into the fatedness of economic laws. The comparison could also work with the eschatological outlook of Christianity, if Christ had not explicitly affirmed that his kingdom 'is not of this world'. What belongs to this world is, instead, the Promised Land, though it is no doubt blasphemous to identify it with a conquerable, and *today* conquered, Palestine. It is true, moreover, that the parallel between the inevitable better future predicted by Marxism and the one 'remembered' by the Jewish prophets is, at best, partial. The Promised Land cannot be conquered through a struggle with other men, for that would then confirm its predestined belonging, while the era of welfare and justice predicted by Marxism can only be reached if the fated consequences of economic laws are accompanied by the struggle of the exploited against the exploiters. Marx seems to have been convinced of the inevitability of this second aspect of economic and social

metamorphosis as well. There should be a fated correspondence between the progressive growth of misery, oppression and exploitation on the one hand and the growing resistance of the working class, 'a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself' on the other.¹ The advent of socialism should *in all its facets* have its premises in capitalism, affirming itself in correlation with the progressive and inevitable accentuation of the contradictions internal to capitalism. So the setbacks and the out-and-out defeats of the exploited class could not in any way alter the direction of an extremely dramatic but inalterable and unstoppable process. At the same time, the strategy of the working-class organizations should be based on a painstaking evaluation of the mutable balance of forces which correspond to the situations determined by the internal dialectic of capitalism, so as not to miss the opportunities to seize power when it is possible to do so. It should also avoid consigning organizational forces and structures to their certain defeat when the possibility does not obtain.

In brief, what is at stake is, on the one hand, a correct evaluation of the times grounded in the analysis of socio-economic conditions and the balance of forces present within them, and, on the other, a progressive effort to develop and organize the exploited class, so that when the clash comes it does not find itself unprepared.

This political orientation, and the philosophy of history that corresponds to it, encounters a grave obstacle

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling trans) (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), pp. 836–7.

time in order to organize their cruel manoeuvres. Mobilization plans provide for a suspension of normal time and the emergence, as quickly as possible—in a matter of days—of a new experience of time, made necessary by the political and economic requirements of a war. For as long as the war will last, men will be placed in a different time. In other words, they will be forced to have a different experience of time. For soldiers, hours are measured on the basis of guard-duty shifts, the strictly foreseen sequence of marches, the building of trenches and fortifications, the assaults, the destruction of specific targets. The mobile field kitchen (we are referring in particular to the time under consideration, that is, the First World War) with its regular appearances is an important confirmation of changing rhythms. The provisioning of food, conditioned by military organization and the situation at the frontline, fundamentally alters the day's rhythm. One eats not when 'the farmer returns tired to his shed' nor when the workers at the siren's sound converge on the mess hall but when the field kitchen materializes with its steaming or cold cornucopia. And one eats not home-made food, predictably poor or rich, but the food that the circumstances—and therefore also the time—have allowed one to prepare. The time factor is even more grimly determining—one eats a greater quantity of food at the field kitchen if in the meanwhile there have been more deaths.

During war, ordinary time is not in force. For the soldiers, the alternation between light and dark only has a meaning for military operations; you move at night, halt during the day . . . It's the First World War, and the

ceased to exist but also because there had transpired that suspension of historical time and that release which are indispensable for the holders of power seeking to restore that normal time which they themselves had suspended during the four years of war.

Too long a wait risks becoming spasmodic; an action whose consequences are very distant in time risks eliciting that prolonged and dramatic wait from which subversions may spring forth. In such circumstances, it is good policy for those who wield power to make sure that the excitation of the excessively prolonged wait is released in the desired moment and in the desired forms. Otherwise, the accumulated tension may result in not a revolt but a revolution. In other words, if a release is not deliberately provoked, the tension of the wait may be transformed into organized revolutionary energy. In that case, the direct clash will probably come much later—but it will be far more dangerous, because it will have been preceded by a long labour of consolidation of the revolutionary forces, threatening not only for the symbols of power but also for the actual economic and social structures of the capitalist state.

For these reasons, the Spartacist revolt was useful to the very power against which it flung itself. For that power, the restoration of *normal time* was vital; and only through revolt and release could normal time be restored.

Normal time is not just a bourgeois concept but the outcome of a bourgeois manipulation of time. It guarantees bourgeois society a calm endurance. But it can also be deliberately suspended whenever it is convenient—the masters of war always need a suspension of normal

in the phenomenon of revolt. I use the word *revolt* to designate an insurrectional movement that differs from revolution. The difference between revolt and revolution should not be sought in their respective aims; they can both have the same aim—to seize power. What principally distinguishes revolt from revolution is, instead, a different experience of time. If, following the ordinary meaning of the two words, revolt is a sudden insurrectional explosion, which can be placed within a strategic horizon but which does not in itself imply a long-distance strategy, and revolution is a strategic complex of insurrectional movements, coordinated and oriented over the mid- to long term towards ultimate objectives, then we could say that revolt suspends historical time. It suddenly institutes a time in which everything that is done has a value in itself, independently of its consequences and of its relations with the transitory or perennial complex that constitutes history. Revolution would, instead, be wholly and deliberately immersed in historical time.

The study of the genesis and unfolding of the Spartacist insurrection will allow us to verify the accuracy of this distinction, and to provide a more precise account of the particular experience of time which we think is peculiar to revolt.

During the first 15 days of January 1919, the experience of time changed in Berlin. For four years the war had suspended the usual rhythm of life. Every hour had become an hour of waiting—waiting for the next move (one's own or the enemy's). These were all instants in a greater wait, the wait for victory. In the first days of January 1919, that wait, which had matured over the previous

four years, appeared to have been fulfilled by the sudden and tremendously brief apparition of an atypical time in which everything that happened—with extreme speed—seemed to happen for ever. It was no longer a matter of living and acting in the framework of tactics and strategy, within which intermediate objectives could be immensely distant from the final objective and yet prefigure it—the greater the distance, the more anxious the wait. ‘Now or never!’ One had to act once and for all, and the fruit of the action was the content of the action itself. Every decisive choice, every irrevocable action, meant being in agreement with time; every hesitation, to be out of time. When it all ended, some of the real protagonists had left the stage for ever.

On 31 December 1918, the Spartakusbund had called its own national congress.² Up to that moment, the Spartacists had not dissociated themselves from the Independent Social Democratic Party which, by then, was participating in the Social Democratic government of Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann. Seeking to contrast the compromises of the Independent socialist³

2 Our principal sources for the reconstruction of the events are the writings of Rosa Luxemburg, a detailed bibliography of which can be found in *Scritti politici* (Lelio Basso ed.) (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1967); and the two fundamental biographies by Paul Frölich (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940) and John Peter Nettl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, 2 vols). See also Eric Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement: A Study of the Relation of Political Theory and Party Practice* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1965).

3 By Independent socialists, Jesi is using the common appellation for members of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which in the original text is erroneously referred to throughout as Independent Socialist Party. [Trans.]

members of a party or union (not by part of *the* party or *the* union, that is, of their leading cadre) does not involve the party or the union. However, such an assertion would not be very realistic since, while such a choice could take place without making the party or the union responsible for the decision to revolt, it would in any case—from the standpoint of historical consequences—also implicate the non-consenting, non-responsible organizational structures of the party or union in the revolt. A class party or union cannot be involved in a revolt because their scale, their collective reality, their values cannot be those of the revolt. But this is really a theoretical argument. Even if they are not implicated in the sense we speak of, the class party or union are inexorably forced to endure the consequences of the revolt, if it takes place. What’s more, on the occasion of the revolt, their most responsible members are confronted with extremely serious problems and contradictions, in the face of which every choice has decisive consequences for the future life of the party or union and for the class struggle. And it may turn out that, in the hour of revolt, those in charge of the party or union must choose to favour the revolt they did not want, all the while energetically criticizing it.

The Spartacist revolt failed. The rebels did not manage to seize the symbols of power, not to mention its instruments. Once the revolt came to an end, it became evident that, to a considerable extent, it had served the very power it attacked. Not only because in 10 days of clashes the Berlin proletariat had lost a great number of its activists and almost the entirety of its leadership, not only because the organizational structures of the class had

actions in which, it is believed, class consciousness exteriorizes itself. Participation in revolt is determined by the choice of an action closed in on itself, which *from outside* can be seen as inserted in a strategic context but *from inside* appears as absolutely autonomous, isolated, valid in itself, independently of its non-immediate consequences.

The members of a class party or union can, as such, decide on the strategic opportunity of a revolt but that means they decide temporarily to suspend the life of the party or union. Such a decision can be motivated by the foreseeable consequences of the revolt as considered from the outside, in a strategic context—not as an action closed in on itself but as the cause of foreseeable and determined effects. However, because this means choosing the revolt not for its internal reality but for its external one, such a choice insofar as it is made by a minority, instrumentalizes the potential rebels. Whoever does not make the strategic choice of revolt but finds himself faced with the occasion of revolt—an occasion provided by those who effectively made that choice—is instrumentalized. His actions in the revolt are capitalized upon and employed by those for whom the revolt was a strategic choice. Even the rebel who belongs to a party or a union whose leading cadre have decided on revolt is instrumentalized; participation in a party or union does not imply participation in a strategic choice of revolt made by the leadership of the party or union, or even by only a few among those leaders. Party or union on the one hand and revolt on the other are two intrinsically autonomous realities. Analogously, it could be said that the choice of revolt by some

leaders with the Social Democrats, the Spartacists demanded, several times during the winter of 1918, the convening of the Independent Social Democratic Party's congress—they could hope to rally to their positions the whole left wing of the party which was already in open polemic with the leaders participating in the government. For the very same reason, the leadership of the party tried and succeeded in stopping the congress. The Spartacists could no longer apply the tactic previously advocated by Luxemburg in the articles published in Duisburg in *Kampf*—to join the Independent Social Democratic Party while keeping intact the Spartacists' autonomy of programme and action, in order to take advantage of the party's considerable organizational structure and to maintain the relationship with the masses that the party could guarantee. To remain inside the Independent Social Democratic Party now meant for the Spartacists implicitly endorsing participation in the Social Democratic government but without managing to use the party's organization for the sake of the class struggle. At this point, there was no longer a class party in Germany although the actual presence of one seemed indispensable to the continuation of the struggle—that new party would have probably brought together, besides the Spartacists, the so-called Left radicals who had always refused to join the Independent Social Democratic Party as well as a section of the left wing of the party. For these reasons, the first motion of the Spartakusbund congress on 31 December 1918 was the founding of the German Communist Party. The Left radicals, who were meeting on the same day, decided to join it.

The Spartakusbund congress, now formally the congress of the German Communist Party, was faced with the question of whether to take part in the elections for the National Assembly. The leadership of the Spartakusbund, Luxemburg in particular, was in favour of contesting the elections and participating in the National Assembly in order 'to assault and demolish this stronghold. [. . .] To denounce ruthlessly and loudly all the tricks and dodges of the esteemed assembly, to expose its counter-revolutionary work to the masses at every step, to call upon the masses to decide, to intervene—this is the task of the socialists' participation in the National Assembly'.⁴ Despite the attitude of the leadership, the delegates to the congress voted against taking part in the elections. To no avail had Luxemburg sounded a note of caution on 31 December: 'We must not nourish and repeat the illusion of the first phase of the revolution, that of November 9, thinking that it is sufficient to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place in order to bring about a socialist revolution.'⁵ The majority of the delegates were convinced that the new party's first task was precisely the immediate elimination of the obstacles to the revolution, above all, the Social Democratic Party. Those obstacles were perceived as so many heads you needed to knock down in a target shoot.

4 Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Elections to the National Assembly' (December 1918) in *Selected Political Writings* (Robert Looker ed., W. D. Graf trans.) (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 288–9.

5 Rosa Luxemburg, 'Our Program and the Political Situation' (31 December 1918) (Dick Howard trans.) in *Selected Political Writings* (Dick Howard ed and introd.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 403.

In a revolt, a reality manifests itself that is also objective, collective, exhaustive, exclusive. Parties and unions are driven back by the revolt into the 'before' and 'after' of the revolt itself. Either they accept to temporarily suspend their self-consciousness of their own value or they find themselves in open competition with the revolt. In the revolt, parties and unions do not exist any more—only groups of contenders. The organizational structures of parties and unions can be used by those who prepare the revolt. But once the revolt begins they become simple instruments to guarantee the operative affirmation of values that are not the values of the party and the union but only the intrinsic value of the revolt. The ideologies of the party and the unions can be the same as those of the rebels but, in the instant of revolt, the rebels perceive only the symbolic components of these ideologies. This does not happen as long as parties and unions act as such. In the life of the party or the union, the symbolic components of ideology are not lacking in weight but they never become the *only* ideological element—the class party and class union are structures immersed in historical time and space; revolt is the suspension of historical time and space. We expressly say *suspension* and not *evasion* because evasion is usually understood as a choice fatefully imposed by weakness in the face of the sufferings of history while revolt—the suspension of historical time and space—can correspond to a precise strategic choice. What we wish to say, then, is that revolt can *also* be evasion but cannot *only* be evasion.

Participation in the life of the class party or union is determined by the choice of an uninterrupted series of

the party has been undergoing over the last 50 years in the domain of the class struggle. This is certainly not because the replacement of party political leadership with the pure and simple expression of the rebel's will to fight is a realistic proposal. Rather, it is because, in multiple circumstances, the parties corresponding to the exploited classes have been unable either to promote the revolutionary development of those classes or to channel into the process of development a potential for struggle otherwise destined to issue not into revolution but into revolt.

The German Communist Party in 1919 did not have the time to promote any development of the class—a few days after its foundation, the revolt had already exploded. What we need to assess is why that party did not find a way to be (and therefore was not) a party but only the grouping of a class in revolt.

It is not uncommon for a political party to be hostile to the imminent revolt desired by a fraction of its members, or, at least, by those who profess an ideology similar to its own. As a collective reality, a party (or perhaps it is better to be more specific, a class party) can find itself in competition with the collective reality determined by the revolt.

Class parties and unions are collective realities to the extent that they are objective realities. In other words, these realities are collective inasmuch as they objectively constitute the structures of the complex of relations that exists within the class and between the class and the outside. Because of this *exhaustive* character, class parties and unions can turn out to be hostile to the imminent revolt.

Many heads, of course: the Social Democrats, the capitalists, the military. But always only heads to topple, symbols of power to conquer; in other words, battle, direct and immediate conflict, since you must not hesitate in giving battle when the definitive victory depends only on a test of strength, and you're convinced you're strong enough. The delegates all harboured the conviction that they were strong. Not because they simply dismissed Luxemburg's preoccupation with the nearly negligible revolutionary responsiveness of the countryside but because they possessed the certainty that conquest of the *symbols of power*—especially the conquest of Berlin—would necessarily mean total victory.

In Berlin, the revolutionary forces were considerable. But on 27 December, even before the end of the Spartakusbund congress, there began, on orders from the Social Democratic government, the amassing of troops round the capital. On 4 January, Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske inspected the so-called Lüttwitz Section at the city gates, comprising horse-mounted hunters from the 17th and 31st infantry divisions, the provincial hunters corps⁶ and the Hülsen free corps. At dawn the same day, the Minister of Interior had stripped of his authority the police prefect Emil Eichhorn, an Independent socialist against whom the Social Democratic paper *Politisch-Parlamentarische Nachrichten* had mounted a slander campaign beginning on 1 January, accusing him of having used public monies to prepare for civil war. As police prefect, Eichhorn did not answer to the Minister of Interior but to Berlin's Executive Council. He refused to accept his dismissal and declared

⁶ *Freiwilligen Landesjägerkorps*.

himself ready to abide by the decisions of the Central Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. Even though the right-wing socialists held a majority in that Central Council, the government refused. At that point, the Independent Social Democratic Party⁷ called a demonstration in favour of Eichhorn for 5 January, which was joined by the Communist Party. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators gathered under the police prefecture and called on Eichhorn to remain at his post, declaring themselves ready to defend him. At the same time, there was a meeting of the leadership of the Independent Social Democratic Party, the revolutionary delegates and two representatives of the Communist Party, Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck. The meeting came to a close with the decision not only to defend Eichhorn but to overthrow the Ebert-Scheidemann Social Democratic government. A revolutionary committee was constituted, presided over by Karl Liebknecht, Paul Scholze and Georg Ledebour.

In less than a week, the revolt which the majority of delegates to the Spartakusbund congress, by their refusal to take part in elections, had chosen as their programme, had become reality. For the reasons outlined above, we say *revolt* and not *revolution*. The word *revolution* correctly designates the entire complex of short- and long-term actions that are carried out by those who are conscious of wanting to alter *in historical time* a political, social, economic situation, and who develop their own

⁷ The Independent Social Democratic Party had practically been forced to leave the government at the end of 1918, faced with the unacceptable demands of the Social Democrats (restitution of military command to the generals of the Imperial Army, resumption of war against Poland and Russia).

In fact it appears today that, more than premature, the foundation of the party was insubstantial. The new-born German Communist Party was not—or should we say, was not yet—a party. Its instrumentalization by its enemy, which dragged it into the revolt, met few obstacles precisely because it was not yet a party but, formal appearances aside, a grouping of people all endowed to a greater or lesser degree with class consciousness and the will to fight. When minutely preordained circumstances brought the tension to breaking point, there was no longer a party but a flag of revolt.

The failure of the Spartacist revolt (even the onset of that revolt) was marked by a severe crisis of political organization and leadership. It was a mistake to begin the revolt but an equally serious weakness was manifest in the party's incapacity to limit the extent of the defeat.

To the distinction between revolt and revolution we can add here the recognition of a basic contradiction between party and revolt. The German Communist Party was not lacking in capable and genuinely revolutionary leaders. Nearly everyone in the party leadership was in agreement with Luxemburg about the need to run in the National Assembly elections in order to unhinge the assembly from within and to use it as a tribune to call the masses to a greater and more effective political maturity. Should one accuse those leaders of sacrificing their line of struggle to democratic scruples? To have put to the vote, rather than authoritatively affirmed, the programme which alone they considered effective?

The contradiction between party and revolt foregrounds the terms of the extremely severe crisis which

and being charged, much more than by playing as a child in its streets or strolling through it with a girl. In the hour of revolt, one is no longer alone in the city.

But when the revolt has passed, independently of its outcome, everyone goes back to being an individual in a society that is better, worse or the same as before. When the clash is over—you can be in prison or in hiding or calm at home—the everyday individual battles begin again. If historical time is not further suspended in circumstances and for reasons that may even differ from those of the revolt, every happening and every action is once again evaluated on the basis of its presumed or certain consequences.

The foundation of the German Communist Party preceded by only a few days the explosion of the Spartacist revolt. In the first motion of the party congress one can already recognize—no doubt with hindsight—the gravest ideological and strategic contradiction, destined to reveal itself in all of its starkness in the revolt's failure. With 62 votes against 23, the congress delegates refused the party's participation in the elections for the National Assembly. Rosa Luxemburg tried to see in this choice—which she deemed wrong and against which she had vigorously argued—the almost obvious and redeemable error of an organization taking its first steps: 'It is natural for an infant to scream.' It seems instead that Leo Jogiches remained particularly shaken by the congress' pronouncement, probably drawing from it the conclusion that the party's foundation had been premature.

tactical and strategic plans by constantly considering the relations between cause and effect in historical time, within the most far-seeing perspective possible. On 31 December 1918, Luxemburg had noted:

I have tried to show you that the Revolution of November 9 was, above all, a political revolution, whereas it is necessary that it become in addition and mainly an economic revolution. [. . .] [H]istory is not going to make our revolution an easy matter like the bourgeois revolutions in which it sufficed to overthrow that official power at the centre and to replace a dozen or so of persons in authority. We have to work from beneath, and this corresponds to the mass character of our revolution which aims at the foundation and base of the social constitution. [. . .] There, at the base, where the individual employer confronts his wage slaves; at the base, where all the executive organs of political class rule confront the object of this rule, the masses; there, step by step, we must seize the means of power from the rulers and take them into our own hands.⁸

Every *revolt* can instead be described as a suspension of historical time. The greater part of those who take part in a revolt choose to commit their individuality to an action whose consequences they can neither know nor predict. At the moment of the clash, only a restricted minority is conscious of the entire strategic design (even

⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson eds) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), p. 373.

though such a design exists) within which the clash is situated as a precise, even if hypothetical, concatenation of causes and effects. The clash of the revolt distils the symbolic components of the ideology that has put the strategy in motion and only these are truly perceived by the combatants. The adversary of the moment truly becomes *the enemy*, the rifle or club or bicycle chain truly becomes *the weapon*, the victory of the moment—be it partial or total—truly becomes, in and of itself, *a just and good act* for the defence of freedom, the defence of one's class, the hegemony of one's class.

Every revolt is a battle, but a battle in which one has deliberately chosen to participate. The instant of revolt determines one's sudden self-realization and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity—everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy. Everyone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols—everyone's individual space, dominated by one's personal symbols, by the shelter from historical time that everyone enjoys in their individual symbology and mythology, expands, becoming the symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety.

Every revolt is circumscribed by precise borders in historical time and historical space. Before it and after it lie the no-man's-land and duration of each and everyone's lives in which uninterrupted individual battles are fought.

Rather than an uninterrupted duration of revolt in historical time, the concept of permanent revolution manifests the will to succeed, at each and every moment, in suspending historical time so as to find collective refuge in the symbolic space and time of revolt. Until a moment before the clash, or at least before the programmed action with which the revolt begins, the potential rebel lives in his house or perhaps his refuge, often with his relatives; and as much as that residence and that environment may be provisional, precarious, conditioned by the imminent revolt, until the revolt begins they are the site of a more or less solitary individual battle which continues to be the same as in the days when the revolt did not seem imminent—the individual battle between good and evil, survival and death, success and failure. The sleep before the revolt—presuming the revolt begins at dawn!—may even be as placid as that of the prince of Condé but it does not possess the paradoxical tranquillity of the moment of the clash. In the best of cases, it is an hour of truce for the individual who has gone to sleep without ceasing to feel like an individual.

You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your *own* city—your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the 'others'; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen; your own because it is a circumscribed space in which historical time is suspended and in which every act is valuable in and of itself, in its absolutely immediate consequences. One appropriates a city by fleeing or advancing, charging